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WHAT CELL PHONES MEAN IN YOUNG PEOPLE'S DAILY LIVES AND SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

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ABSTRACT

In this exploratory study, we present a preliminary analysis of narrative accounts written by 72 undergraduate students, to help shed light on what cell phones mean in the daily lives and social interactions of young people. At a time when, increasingly, people are using and becoming familiar with information and communication technologies (ICTs) in their personal lives before these technologies infiltrate the work space, an understanding of how young people develop emotional connections with their cell phones could provide insight into what ICT use may be like in the future. The narrative accounts provided by study participants elucidate what cell phones mean in young people's lives. Our study reveals that young people become increasingly dependent, and develop deeper emotional ties with cell phones, as usage permeates more aspects of their daily lives and social interactions.

Keywords

Cell phones, narrative accounts, exploratory, emotional ties, social interactions

INTRODUCTION

A potential shift (referred to as "*consumerization of IT*") is taking place in the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Where, in the past, individuals first encountered ICTs in the workplace and then started using them in their personal lives, today people are using, and becoming familiar with, ICTs in their personal lives before these have infiltrated the work space (Schaffner, 2010). Nowhere is consumerization of IT more evident than in the lives of young people who have grown up alongside consumer technologies such as cell phones, video, web services, and social media. To develop understanding of what ICT use may be like in the future, there is a growing need to understand how young people develop emotional ties to the ICTs they interact with on a daily basis. Because few, if any, consumer technologies have enjoyed such widespread popularity as the cell phone, this technology is particularly appropriate to explore this phenomenon.

MOTIVATION

The philosophical assumption underpinning this study is that individuals construct meaning through their experiences of the world and that social processes can be understood through the language used to describe them (Orlikowski and Baroudi, 1991). Consequently, to understand the meanings young people construct through interaction with cell phones, it is important to learn about that interaction from their perspective (Chen and Hirschheim, 2004).

To this end, in the spring and fall of 2010, our research team began an exploratory research project involving 72 students enrolled in undergraduate level management information systems courses at a large southeastern university. At this university, "creative inquiry" projects provide undergraduate students with the opportunity to delve deeper into information and communication technology (ICT) use and, in particular, to explore questions that the students find interesting.

For this particular project, the research team was interested to learn about young people's experiences with cell phones. In particular, the following research questions were investigated:

- How has the presence of cell phones has changed (or left unchanged) young people's daily lives and social interactions?
- How does the absence of cell phones impact young people's daily lives and social interactions?

Because this study takes an interpretivist approach, we limit our literature review to a short overview of relevant studies. Much of cell phone research has been heavily influenced by early research on landline use. For example, O'Keefe and Sulanowski's (1995) examination of individual behavior and phone use conceptualized landline phone users as having one of two broad motives: intrinsic or instrumental. Intrinsic motives are those that drive socialization, such as chatting, or keeping in contact with family (Keller, 1979; Noble 1987), as well as fun and entertainment (Williams, Dordick, & Jesuale, 1985), while instrumental motives are oriented toward completion of some task, such as using a phone to order products or make appointments (Wei and Lo, 2006). Other research involving communication via the cell phone has dealt with its popularity and diffusion in different communities (Ishii, 1996; Puro, 2002; Wei and Lo, 2006), the use of a cell phone to coordinate daily activities (Ling and Haddon, 2003), as well as differences in cell phone use arising due to gender (Ling and Haddon, 2003) and age (Ling and Yttri, 2002).

EXPLORATORY DATA COLLECTION

Written narrative accounts have been used extensively to examine human interaction with media (e.g. Barnhurst and Wartella, 1991; Matthews, 2003; McMillan and Morrison, 2006). Narrative accounts are an important source of data in exploratory research because they provide study participants with an opportunity to reflect on their experiences. As such, they "can help capture the evolution of cultural patterns and how those patterns are linked to the lives of individuals" (McMillan and Morrison, 2006, p. 76). To this end, over the course of a single semester, student participants were invited to engage in three separate activities and provide narrative accounts of their experiences.

In the first narrative account, participants kept journals documenting three 24-hour periods of cell phone use and non-use. In period one, participants logged their cell phone usage. In period two, the students handed their cell phones over to the research team and logged the emotions they experienced when unable to use their cell phones, as well as their use of alternative technologies. In period three, the students documented their reactions to getting their cell phones back. In the second, participants logged their normal cell phone use for 5 days. Finally, in the third narrative account, the students wrote autobiographical essays reflecting on their experiences during the semester. The research team examined these written narrative accounts to uncover insights into what use of cell phones means in young people's daily lives and social interactions.

Data was analyzed using the three step process. In the first step, each of the participants' accounts was examined using qualitative content analysis to uncover the meanings embedded in their cell phone use. In the second step, data was analyzed across participants. The "constant comparison" method (Berg, 2000; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) was used to identify key themes and patterns of categories, as well as relationships between categories (e.g. the relationship between a negative emotional response to the absence of a cell phone and the range of participants' use activities). In the third step, categories, patterns, and relationships that had emerged were synthesized to form an overall picture of what cell phones mean in the lives of young people. As depicted in Figure 1, participants in this study developed a stronger emotional connection with their cell phones as the meaning of cell phone use became increasingly embedded in all aspects of their daily lives.

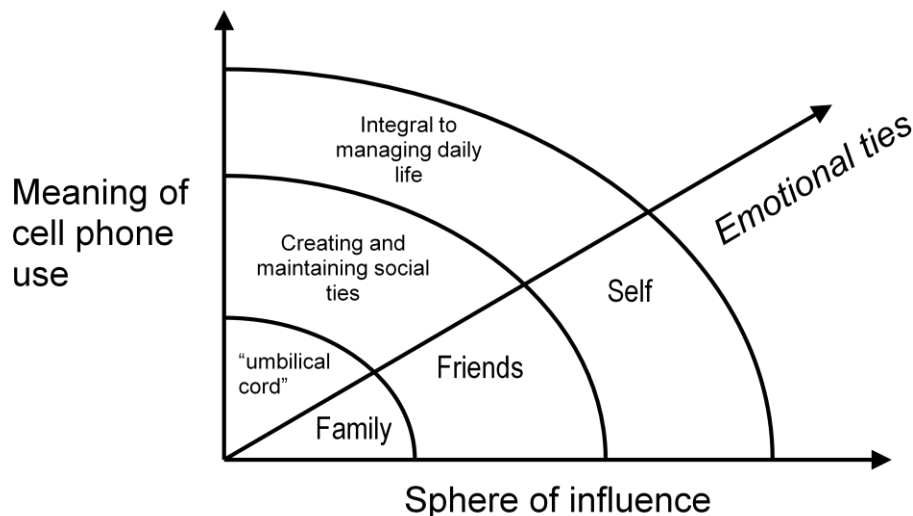


Figure 1. How young people develop emotional ties with their cell phone

FINDINGS

This section discusses the meanings that young people attribute to their cell phone use in relation to each sphere of influence. Direct quotations from participants' narrative accounts, as well as evidence from related literature, are provided in support of key findings.

Family and Cell Phone Use: The “umbilical cord”

Study participants had literally grown up with cell phone. Many reported that their first cell phone was bought by their parents who, typically, cited safety concerns for the purchase. One participant wrote:

My mom wanted to be sure she could reach me and my sister in case there was ever an emergency of any kind. The phone was strictly for emergency use and not be used socially.

Closely related to parents' safety concerns, is that many parents are motivated to buy cell phones to hold on to a permanent communication channel as growing children become increasingly independent (Palen et al., 2001). As one young person wrote:

In high school, when I had to rely on my parents for transportation, I often used it to let them know when and where to pick me up. This was especially helpful for after school activities that would occasionally get cancelled or end before the regular time. My parent also liked for me to take it with me on school trips so that I could contact them easily if I needed to. However, these were about the only ways I would use my cell phone early on. I would often forget it at home and only rarely use it when I did have it.

In general, participants reported that early cell phone use provided them with some freedom, while making it possible for them to stay in contact with parents. However, forgetting a cell phone is not unusual in early cell phone use—particularly when this has been made possible by parents. At this early stage, young people have not developed emotional ties to the cell phone. Instead, they ascribe meanings to the cell phone as it relates to supporting primary familial relationships. Past research supports this finding. For example, in Palen et al.'s (2001) study of new cell phone users, one father describes the phone he has bought for his daughter as an “umbilical cord”.

Friends and Cell Phone Use: Creating and Maintaining Social Ties

As cell phone use begins to infiltrate the “friends” sphere of influence young people begin to develop emotional ties to their phones. Removing participants' phones for 24 hours revealed that even light users feel dependent on their phones to maintain social ties. In the passage below, one young man reflects on giving up his cell phone:

When I had to give up my phone for one day, I was not all that worried. I am not that person you see [who is] always on their phone and not paying much attention to everything else... Mostly, I just had the feeling of something important missing... It wasn't that I was itching to text someone or anything. I was just a little paranoid that the one day I didn't have my phone would be the day I would desperately need it.

As McMillan and Morrison (2006) report, it is often friends and peers who most strongly impact young people's adoption and use of ICTs. One participant, who defined himself as “less than the average cell phone user”, explained how he felt in high school, prior to owning a cell phone:

I first got a cell phone my sophomore year in high school. I remember feeling before my purchase of the phone that I needed to have one. I felt as if I was a little bit “socially awkward” for not having a phone. I also remembered feeling slightly embarrassed when I had to ask friend if I could use their phone. Finally, I remembered feeling almost empowered once I finally decided to pay for the phone and the monthly fee.

Part of the explanation for why young people develop emotional ties with cell phones is that they become increasingly reliant on them for creating and maintaining social ties. One young woman described how text messaging has become a critical aspect of having a positive social life in college:

When I came to college, since all the relationships I was making were new, I did not feel as comfortable calling as I did texting. Texting is not as direct a way of communicating and can be less awkward.... Since leaving for college, I have seen an increase in the amount of text messages I send and receive, probably because I have made many close acquaintances in college, but still only have a few close friends that I call... Having a cell phone [allows] groups of friends to stay in touch, even when far away... I can quickly text my friends from home if something reminds me of them, or I often text them to set up a time to call and catch up. So, not only does my cell phone help me establish a new set of friends in college, but it also helps me maintain old friendships.

Another participant tells how not having his cell phone for 24 hours negatively affected him and those around him:

The main reason I use my phone is to keep in touch with friends. When we did not use our phones for 24 hours, I felt frustrated, stressed and inconvenienced by not having it. Not having my phone also affected those around me. My roommates were inconvenienced when they needed rides from class or needed to send information to me. I also found that those who are in on-campus organizations with me found it inconvenient. I lead a team of nine other students and they became frustrated because they could not call or text me when they needed guidance. I was unable to attend a friend's birthday dinner because they could not get in touch with me. Situations like this reinforced the idea that cell phone use greatly contributes to my social ties and enables me to maintain friendships well.

Finally, participants reported how using cell phones to coordinate schedules gives them greater flexibility in planning events. Ling and Yttri (1999) refer to the ability to refine schedules up to the last minute as “microcoordination”. Microcoordination has become a social expectation among mobile phone users (Ling and Yttri (1999)—to the extent that when their cell phone features do not support this ability, a person may find them self excluded from plans:

If I had had text messaging, I feel that people could have texted me their plans and I could have met them there when I got out of the gym. Often times, plans would change, so if someone called me to tell me their plan for the night, they would have to call me back and leave me another message. This would get both annoying and confusing for me and the caller. [If I had had text messaging it] would have made people more incline[d] to try and include me in their plans.

The Self and Cell Phone Use: Managing Daily Life

Many participants reported depending on their cell phones to maintain relationships with family and friends. However, often, young people are unaware of the extent of their dependence. Asking study participants to give up their cell phones for one day allowed them to experience how the absence of a cell phone impacted them emotionally. It also provided an opportunity for participants to reflect on the extent to which cell phone use has become embedded in their everyday lives. One young woman wrote of her surprise when she discovered that going without a cell phone for 24 hours “had a bigger impact” on her life than she expected.

I knew my daily usage was minimal, so I felt like being without my cell phone for a whole day would have minimal damages. To my surprise, this was the furthest thing from the truth. I would reach for my phone and realize I do not have it. I was so bored without my phone. Usually, when I'm bored I will call someone to keep me company. Since I could not do that, I found myself with idle time that I did not know what to do with. I did not recognize on a regular day how much my phone is a bit of a companion... When I went to get it back, I felt connected again. I felt like I had gained a part of myself back and I was back in business. I also felt a little more alive and like I had something my possession that could occupy every spare moment of my life.

This participant was a self-described “light user”. However, analysis of her written account provided evidence that, in addition to supporting relationships with family and friends, her daily use included using the phone as a timepiece, an alarm clock, to access the internet, and for entertainment. Because the cell phone was an integral part of her everyday life, she experienced a loss of self when it was removed, even for a relatively short period. This account was not atypical. A number of participants reported that as the interaction between themselves and their phones became more personal in nature, they developed an increasing reliance and sense of connection to the device. Moreover, participants who used a fuller range of features—including using the phones as a calendar, an alarm clock, for internet banking, to play games, and access weather reports—experienced a positive sense of self when their cell phones were returned.

Vincent (2006) explains individuals’ increasing emotional ties to cell phones as reflecting the investment they have made in their devices. Cell phones, she asserts, become an icon of the user—a reflection of their life at a given point in time. This perspective, supported by this study’s findings suggests that as cell phone use permeates more aspects of young people’s lives, so the meanings young people attribute to their usage contributes to deeper emotional ties with the cell phone. Of particular interest is that young people appear to develop deeper emotional ties with the cell phone when usage contributes to a positive sense of self. Future research may wish to investigate the extent to which people develop emotional ties to other technologies.

CONCLUSION

This study draws on written narrative accounts provided by 72 undergraduate students to explore what cell phones mean in the daily lives and social interactions of young people. Our preliminary analysis of the data suggests relationships between range of cell phone use, relationships supported (i.e. family, friends, self) and emotional ties to the cell phone. In particular, participants in this study reported a stronger emotional connection with their cell phones as the meaning of cell phone use became increasingly embedded in all aspects of their daily lives. At a time when, increasingly, people are using and

becoming familiar with information and communication technologies (ICTs) in their personal lives before these technologies infiltrate the work space, an understanding of how young people develop emotional connections with their cell phones could help provide insight into what ICT use may be like for future generations.

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